



Testimony IN SUPPORT of:
**SB-184, An Act Extending through November 8, 2022 Several Changes Regarding
Election Administration as a Result of Covid-19 and Concerning Eligibility to Vote by
Absentee Ballot**
HB-5262, An Act Revising Certain Absentee Voting Eligibility Statutes.

Good morning Co-Chairs Sen. Flexer and Rep. Fox, Ranking Members Sen. Sampson and Rep. Mastrofrancesco and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

My name is Callie Gale Heilmann and I am the Co-Director of Bridgeport Generation Now Votes and a resident of Bridgeport, CT. At Gen Now Votes, we are on a mission to strengthen democracy in Bridgeport and increase voter turnout in our local elections. We are a member of the CT Safe Vote coalition and organize our own Unrig Bridgeport Coalition, which includes our important grassroots partners - Bridgeport Strong, Greater Bridgeport NAACP, Greater Bridgeport ED Gomes Black Democratic Club, Make the Road CT, PT Partners, CT Citizen Action Group, SEIU 1199, and more.

I'm testifying today in strong support of SB-184 and HB-5262. We worked on the ground during our 2021 municipal elections, knocking on doors to get out the vote. We know firsthand how important the expansion to absentee voting was in 2020 and 2021 for Bridgeport residents who were overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in the 2020 presidential election - in part due to this expanded access to the ballot - Bridgeport had the highest voter turnout of any large municipality in the state! To this day, Bridgeport has consistently had higher case and death rates and lower rates of vaccination. We're still in a public health crisis and no voter should have to choose between their safety, the safety of their loved ones, and their freedom to vote.

We also support HB-5262, to amend state statutes regarding the "illness" provision for absentee ballot voting to align them with the State Constitution.

We've come before this committee before so let me be clear: we agree with our colleagues that there is absolutely no evidence of in-person voter fraud. But the closed nature of Connecticut elections - and the burdens placed on voters to exercise our right to vote - does mean that local elections in our state can be manipulated when political actors are highly motivated.

What we have in Bridgeport are paid political operatives that manipulate some of our most vulnerable voters - our elderly, disabled, low-income, and monolingual Spanish speakers. The current absentee ballot process makes it easy to abuse the system, and abuse voters.

When we helped voters sue city officials and the Ganim campaign after Bridgeport's 2019 mayoral primary, evidence proved that political operatives in Bridgeport are paid to solely distribute AB applications - which is against state law; that they lie to voters about the laws governing who is qualified to use an AB - against state law; that they forged voters signatures and applications - against state law; that they took voters ballots from them - against state law.

[State Superior Court Judge Stevens, in his ruling on this case, noted that it was the first of its kind in the state, and indicated that Connecticut's laws on absentee ballots were being exploited and therefore required close attention of the General Assembly.](#) In particular, Judge Stevens called for early voting; prohibitions against party workers circulating absentee ballots; and an end to the strict requirements on the use of absentee ballots, which are limited to military personnel, the sick or elderly and voters who plan to be out-of-town on election days.

In order to create an inclusive, multiracial democracy in this state, we need real, structural change. No one should come between a voter and their access to the ballot. What **we** need is to be freed from this abusive system.

For the voters of Bridgeport, that structural change will come when we expand no-excuse access permanently to mail-in voting and fully restrict paid political operatives from inserting themselves between voters and their access to the ballot.

I know you all believe strongly in democracy, voting rights, and fair elections. It's time to strengthen our democracy by protecting and expanding voting rights.

Sincerely,
Callie Gale Heilmann
Co-Director, Bridgeport Generation Now Votes
Bridgeport, CT